DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 285 387 FL 016 836

AUTHOR Prado, Marcial
TITLE The Semantics of Pluralization in Spanish.
PUB DATE 86
NOTE 10p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Journal Articles (080)
JOURNAL CIT Selecta; v7 p1-8 1986

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Form Classes (Languages); Morphology (Languages); Negative Forms (Language); *Nouns; *Plurals; *Semantics; *Spanish; Structural Analysis (Linguistics); *Syntax

ABSTRACT

Analysis of examples of abstract and concrete nouns reveals that pluralization in Spanish is a complex phenomenon from the semantic point of view. The number of abstract negative nouns being pluralized far outweighs that of their positive counterparts. Syntactic pluralization of abstracts implies a semantic change, and sometimes the pluralization of the abstract noun, both positive and negative, carries a drastic change in meaning. The negative semantic feature seems to provide a greater degree of individualization and concretization, facilitating combination of the semantic category with the lexical category of number. The pluralization of concrete nouns is even more complex. In nouns representing things composed of several parts (e.g., "viveres," "calores"), the plural reminds us of the parts and conveys a more complete semantic detail. In some cases, there is a noticeable semantic change (e.g., "esposas" for handcuffs or wives), and it is unclear why some concrete nouns are pluralized. A negative or pejorative connotation accompanies some syntactic plurals, and others give conflicting signs of markedness and gender. Further, the exclusive use of pluralized nouns in some idioms, where the noun's ordinary meaning has completely changed, suggests that semantic pluralization is more complex than the addition of a morpheme to the singular form. (MSE)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED285387

THE SEMANTICS OF PLURALIZATION IN SPANISH

Marcial Prado
California State University, Fullerton

FL 016836

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

R. Verzasconi

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

THE SEMANTICS OF PLURALIZATION IN SPANISH

Marcial Prado
California State University, Fullerton

From a semantic point-of-view, plural means "more than one," but this is true only when dealing with concrete count nouns such as libros 'books.' Certainly, cóleras 'anger' does not mean 'two or more angers,' but 'two or more acts or instances of anger.' In this case, we are dealing with an abstract mass noun whose pluralization entails a change from abstract to concrete and from mass noun to countable. The new semantic nuance is 'act or instance of the abstract attribute.' On the other hand, when we say bodas 'wedding' in expressions like viaje de bodas or bodas de odio, we do not refer to 'more than one wedding' but to 'one single wedding with an undetermined number of ceremonies'(cf. with English nuptials). A plural form like verbos 'verbs' in sentences like los verbos son complicados does not mean 'two or more' but 'all possible verbs.' However, a plural like gafas 'eyeglasses' in sentences like no puedo ver sin gafas means exactly 'one single object' with more than one part.

Although the semantic category of plural is closely related to the morphosyntactic plural, there are many cases of disagreement between what we may call the deep structure plural (semantics) and the surface plural (morphosyntax).

From a logical (and semantic) point-of-view, it seems obvious that the only category to be pluralized is the noun, and yet, most of the Indoeuropean languages, especially the Romance family, show a redundant morphosyntactic pluralization in determiners, adjectives and verbs. We call it number agreement. Not all the nouns are pluralized semantically and syntactically in parallel ways in related languages; for example, Spanish muebles does not translate *furnitures in English. This is due to the fact that the semantic category of countability (lexical number) varies greatly from one language to another. On the other hand, English and Spanish share many common features within the category of countability, as can be seen in marginal cases such as the concretization of negative abstract nouns like injusticias 'injustices' versus their antonyms *justicias '*justices' (virtue).

It is predictable that the morphological category of number will cross the semantic category of countability in all the languages. Keith Allan affirms that "when the nuclear constituent of a noun syntagm is plural, the noun is countable."[1] The surface morphology of a nuclear noun generally indicates this pluralization by a contrast in the form itself. When this change does not occur (such as in sheep in English or lunes 'Monday' in Spanish), Allan's previous rule is obscure, and we must apply other syntactic criteria such as the pluralization of determiners, adjectives, verbs, or lexical numbers such as 'two, several, many.'

In this paper, we are going to explore a few special cases of syntactic pluralization in Spanish and their relationship with the semantic plural. There are two large groups of nouns to be considered: abstract and concrete. The list of examples is far from being exhaustive but has statistical and methodological value for the instructor of Spanish.

A. Abstract Nouns

James E. Iannucci[2] identifies abstract nouns with mass nouns, and concrete nouns with countables. There is no clear boundary between the two classes. Most of the abstract nouns become concrete when they are used in plural to denote 'acts or instances' of the abstraction. The tendency to do this is far greater in Spanish than in English.

(1) a. Las iras del tirano (The acts of anger of the tyrant).
b. No hagas locuras (Don't do foolish things).

A similar hypothesis is held by Salvador Fernández when he states that "the plural form of abstract nouns usually designates countable things and even material objects."[3] A typical example is bien 'perfection' versus bienes 'riches.'

Iannuci distinguishes three types of abstract nouns in Spanish:[4] (a) nouns that cannot be pluralized such as justicia 'justice,' parsimonia 'moderation'; (b) nouns that can be pluralized with limited concretization; i.e., they admit only indefinite lexical counters (2-a), but reject definite counters (2-b):

(2) a. Tiene muchas/mas energías (He has many/more energies).
b. Tiene *una/*dos energías (He has *one/*two energies).

(c) abstract nouns with complete concretization in plural; i.e., they admit all the lexical counters, definite and indefinite, including un/una 'one'; in this case, the singular form is used as a concrete count noun:

(3) a. Cometió una locura (He did one foolish thing).
b. Cometió dos/muchas locuras (He did two/many foolish things).

Among the abstract nouns, we should mention the infinitive of verbs used as nouns, such as el nadar 'swimming'; usually they are not pluralized. The nominalized adjectives with the neuter lo are never pluralized, for example, lo bueno 'the good thing,' lo mio 'my things.' Obviously, the proper names are only singular, and so are certain nouns whose semantic concept involves unicity, such as cenit 'zenith,' norte 'north,' etc.

Domnita Sirbu-Dumitrescu[5] has noticed that in Spanish and Rumanian the negative abstract nouns are pluralized much more frequently than their affirmative counterparts. Let us summarize the four cases described by her.

I. Negative abstracts singularia tantum whose affirmative antonym can be pluralized. There are very few nouns in this category: ineptitud vs. aptitud/aptitudes 'aptitude'; inactividad vs. actividad/actividades 'activity.' In a few of these nouns, the pluralization involves a new semantic concept, different from its negative counterpart as well as the affirmative singular form; it is a concrete count noun: indisciplina/disciplina 'discipline' vs. disciplinas 'whip, scorge'; inexistencia/existencia 'existence' vs. existencias 'merchandise, stock.'

II. Negative lexemes which are pluralized as well as their affirmative counterparts. In some cases, the plural forms involve the idea of 'concrete acts or instances of the abstraction,' for example in desilusión-es vs. ilusión-es; pena-s vs. alegría-s 'sorrow' vs. 'happiness.'[6] In other cases, the pluralized affirmative lexeme acquires a new concrete meaning: males 'evil' vs. bienes 'riches'; impropiedades 'impropriety' vs. propiedades 'properties'; imposibilidades 'impossibilities' vs. posibilidades 'money.'[7]

III. Negative pluralized lexemes whose affirmative counterparts are singularia tantum, i.e., are never pluralized. There are many words in this category, and they can be divided in two groups: (a) abstracts with a negative prefix; the plural form carries the concrete meaning of 'acts or instances' of the abstraction, for example, injusticias 'acts of injustice' vs. justicia 'justice,' inquietudes 'acts of restlessness' vs. quietud 'stillness.' In some of the words in this category, the plural form entails a radical semantic change, for example, inclemencia 'harshness' vs. inclemencias 'bad weather.' (b) The negative abstract and its affirmative counterpart are two different lexemes without a common root. Only the negative lexemes show pluralization, some of them with limited concretization, such as iras 'acts of anger' vs. calma 'calm,' and some with full concretization, such as tonterías 'acts of foolishness' vs. inteligencia 'intelligence.'

IV. Negative abstracts without affirmative counterparts, at least not easy to be recognized. When they are pluralized, they become full concrete nouns, such as dolencias 'ailments,' vituperios 'insults.' Some of the lexemes in this group change completely the semantic meaning, for example amonestación 'admonition' vs. amonestaciones 'marriage banns.'[8]

B. Concrete Nouns

There are many cases of concrete nouns whose syntactic pluralization brings some kind of semantic anomaly. Sometimes a plural form does not mean 'more than one' but 'a single object.' In other cases, there is a pejorative connotation attached to the plural form and even a complete change of meaning. We have found twelve different categories in this section, and there might be more.

I. Concrete nouns pluralia tantumu. Within this category, there are as many as nine different groups, and in some cases Spanish and English lexemes show parallel semantic and syntactic features.

(a) Objects made of various parts whose plural form means either one object or more than one. A counter is needed to solve the ambiguity, and usually is the word par 'pair,' undoubtedly because most of these objects are composed of two essential parts:

(4) a. Un par de tijeras (A pair of scissors).
b. Dos pares de tijeras (Two pairs of scissors).

And yet, the tendency nowadays is to use the singular form of the lexeme to mean 'one object,' thus regularizing these nouns, for example, alicate 'pliers,' but most of the nouns in this group are always plural, such as gafas 'eyeglasses.'

(b) Nouns whose meaning implies an indefinite amount of heterogeneous, but semantically related objects. These nouns take indefinite counters and reject the definite ones:

(5) Necesitamos muchos/*tres víveres (We need more/*three provisions).

(c) Plural nouns which are derived from adjectives. As an adjective, the word is either singular of plural according to the number agreement rule, as a noun is always plural even if it refers to one entity, for example, prismáticos 'binoculars.' In many cases, the lexeme presupposes semantic plurality as in útiles 'tools.' The meanings of the original adjective and the noun are somehow related, for example, antiguo 'old' and antiguos 'ancestors.'

(d) Certain names of illnesses are always plural, possibly because they relate to two parts of the body such as the eyes, the tonsils, etc., for example, paperas 'mumps,' cataratas 'cataracts,' hemorroides 'hemorrhoids.'

(e) The names of some dishes are plural, especially among the farmers of different parts of the Hispanic world. The logical reason for this syntactic plural might be the fact that these dishes have many ingredients, such as sopas 'soup,' gachas 'porridge,' criadillas 'testicles dish.'

(f) Some of the euphemisms to refer to the sexual parts and their functions are used consistently in plural, such as posaderas 'buttocks,' vergüenzas 'genitals,' purgaciones 'gonorrhea,' aguas menores 'urine.'

(g) The names of the different types of music and dance (but not flamenco) are used only in plural: playeras, bulerías, seviyanas, seguiriyas, peteneras, soleares, malagueñas. They are all Andalusian dances.

(h) Certain nouns are used in plural with a pejorative connotation, for example, rubiales 'rogue,' chancharras 'false excuses.' Some of these words are used in singular without respective meaning as a very different word, such as perejil 'parsley' vs. perejiles 'frippery'; historia 'history' vs. historias 'gossip'; retórica 'rhetoric' vs. retóricas 'sophistries.' In this same line, we should mention the pejorative plural (concrete and countable) of some abstract nouns like lindezas 'insults,' verdades 'pieces of mind' and libertades 'revealing words or manners.'

(i) There are many derived nouns with the feminine plural suffix -eras. This use of feminine forms without a masculine counterpart is striking because the feminine is marked both morphologically and semanticallly in Spanish, while the masculine is unmarked; i.e., it is more natural and frequent than its feminine counterpart.[9] It seems to be that all the nouns derived from verbs carry a pejorative connotation, and their use is colloquial, such as tragaderas 'gullet,' despachaderas 'surly manner of replying'; whereas the nouns derived from nouns are more common and do not show a pejorative meaning, for example, playeras 'beach show,' calzoneras 'trousers,' vinajeras 'cruets.'

II. The plural form of most masculine nouns referring to human beings or animals include semantic referents which are both male and female, such as padres 'father and mother.' This fact supports the hypothesis that the masculine form

is unmarked while the feminine is marked. Actually this plural form is ambiguous because it can refer either to males only or to male(s) and female(s), for example hermanos means either 'brothers' or 'brother(s) and sister(s).' The context must solve the ambiguity.

III. Most of the compound nouns with two lexemes, one verbal and the other nominal, show the plural form of the noun in both singular and plural. Another syntactic device is required to mark pluralization, for example el paraguas/los paraguas 'the umbrella/s'; un/dos abrelatas 'one/two can opener/s'; mi/mis tocadiscos 'my record player/s.'

IV. Many plural nouns have a completely different meaning than their singular counterparts. In other words, there is new sememe, and most of the dictionaries have two separate entries, such as esposas 'handcuffs' and esposa 'wife.' There is always a semantic relationship between both words, but this is not the place to discuss it. The new plural sememe is a single object in some cases and more than one object in other cases. On the other hand, the same plural form may refer to 'more than one object' designated by the singular sememe, and only the context will solve the ambiguity.

(6) a. Pusieron esposas al ladrón (They handcuffed the thief).
b. Las esposas bailaban bien (The wives were dancing well).

V. Many nouns are used both in singular and plural with no clear difference in meaning. The semantics of these nouns usually involve several organs, ceremonies, sections, activities and the like, for example, bodas 'wedding,' funerales 'funeral,' fiestas 'holidays.' Words like jardines 'gardens,' palacios 'palace,' bosques 'forest' seem to emphasize the size rather than the number.[10]

VI. Many nouns and adjectives are pluralized to create adverbial syntagms introduced by a preposition. There are two groups of nouns:

(a) masculine preceded by the preposition a such as a tragos 'by degrees,' a tropezones 'by fits and starts';

(b) feminine nouns or adjectives preceded by a, en, de, sin, con, such as a escondidas 'secretly,' de compras 'shopping,' con creces 'amply,' a gatas 'on all fours,' sin trabas 'freely.'

VII. Certain idiomatic expressions with numbers require the plural form of the noun, such as a dos visos 'with a double view,' dar cien vueltas a uno 'to surpass somebody by much.' Sometimes the noun disappears leaving its plural mark in the determiner, for example, estar en sus trece 'to hold one's opinion at all cost.'

VIII. To indicate different species of animals, plants and minerals, the plural form is used since they refer to an entire collectivity, for example, vertebrados 'vertebrates,' tubérculos 'tubers,' peces 'fishes.'

IX. Some nouns are used always in plural when they are combined with certain adjectives, in spite of the fact that in some cases the semantic referent is one

entity as in bienes inmuebles 'real estate,' gases asfixiantes 'poison gas,' primeros auxilios 'first aid.'

X. Many nouns are always pluralized when they are combined with another noun in the same syntagm. Sometimes the head noun is pluralized as in bodas de oro 'golden wedding,' gajes del oficio 'unpleasant things that go with the job,' and other times the pluralization goes to the noun in the adjectival expression describing the head noun, as in baile de disfraces 'masquerade,' televisión a colores 'color tv,' apretón de manos 'handshake,' persona de campanillas 'important person,' tierras de pan llevar 'bread-producing land,' edificio de comunicaciones 'communication building,' hombre de negocios 'businessman.'

IX. We should mention the feminine clitic pronoun among the anomalous plural forms, las. This plural pronoun has no referent, and it is impossible to figure out the underlying noun or pronoun for the surface pronoun las.[11] This pronoun is always part of an idiomatic expression, for example, tragárselas 'to swallow lies,' cazarlas al vuelo 'to be quick-witted,' guiñarlas 'to die.'

XII. Finally, it is important to mention the nouns that are always pluralized when they are combined with a verb in which case they are part of a full sentence with idiomatic meaning. The most frequent verbs are hacer as in hacer aspavientos 'to show up emotions'; echar as in echar sapos y culebras 'to utter angry words'; dar as in dar calabazas 'to flunk, to jilt'; tener as in tener bemoles 'to be very difficult'; estar as in estar por las nubes 'to be very expensive'; andar as in andar con rodeos 'to beat around the bush.'

C. Conclusion

The examples mentioned in the previous pages as well as in the notes show that pluralization is a very complex phenomenon from the semantic point-of-view. On the one hand, the number of abstract negative nouns being pluralized far outweighs that of their positive counterparts being pluralized. Syntactic pluralization of abstracts implies a semantic change since the abstraction as an indissoluble unit (uncountable) becomes 'concrete acts' (countable) of the abstract attribute. Sometimes the pluralization of the abstract noun, both positive and negative, carries a drastic change in meaning, for example, in bienes 'riches,' lindezas 'insults,' disciplinas 'whip.' The negative semantic feature seems to provide a greater degree of individualization and concretization, thus facilitating their combination with the sememes of the lexical category of number. It seems to be a psychological fact that human beings have a natural tendency to overemphasize and exaggerate whatever attribute stands out, anything that is not common, especially if it is laughable. The tendency to pluralize these negative nouns broadens and enhances their semantic field.

On the other hand, the pluralization of concrete nouns entails even more complexities than that of the abstract nouns. Traditional grammars used to consider very logical the plural form of words like tijeras 'scissors,' pantalones 'trousers,' for being composed of several parts, but they never mentioned words like enseres 'household goods,' víveres 'foods,' composed of several objects rather than parts. A social event usually presupposes several ceremonies, persons, places, etc. thus, the plural of bodas 'wedding,' vacaciones 'vacation'; in actas 'minutes', the plural reminds us of the many articles or parts; in

arenas 'sands,' of the vastness of beaches and deserts; in calores 'heat,' of the heat coming in waves. In all these cases, the contrast between singular and plural is not clear, but somehow the plural seems to convey a more complete semantic detail.

In words like esposas 'handcuffs' or 'wives,' palomas 'popcorn' or pigeons,' maromas 'tricks' or 'ropes,' there is a notable change of semantics. In adjectives like árido 'dry,' there is an obvious but unpredictable semantic relationship with the noun áridos 'dry goods.' It is not clear why the following are pluralized: illnesses like paperas 'mumps,' some country dishes like sopas 'soup,' and euphemisms related to sexual parts and their functions like hacer de aguas 'to urinate.'

A negative or pejorative connotation is attached to many syntactic plurals such as tragaderas 'gullet,' lindezas 'insults,' un bragazas 'a weakling,' traérselas 'to get worse and worse,' dinarlas 'to die.' We should add that all these plurals are also very colloquial by nature. The semantic pluralization of masculine forms like padres 'father and mother,' perros 'male and female dogs,' seems to favor the hypothesis on the markedness of the feminine gender; and yet, the consistent pluralization of such feminine forms like playeras 'beach shoes,' a oscuras 'in the dark,' bulerías (a type of Andalusian music), vérselas 'to confront,' en volandillas 'flying' suggests that the feminine is unmarked, as if it were more natural, and therefore, more frequent than its masculine counterpart. Furthermore, the exclusive use of pluralized nouns in numberless idiomatic expressions such as tener bemoles 'to be very difficult,' perder los estribos 'to lose one's head,' llevar palos 'to get a beating,' where the noun has changed completely the ordinary meaning, suggest that semantic pluralization involves many more complexities than merely adding a morpheme to the singular form.

Notes

[1]Keith Allan, "Nouns and Countability," Language, 56 (1980), pp. 541-567.

[2]James E. Iannucci, Lexical Number in Spanish with Reference to their English Equivalents (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1952), p. 30.

[3]Salvador Fernández, Gramatica española. Los sonidos. El nombre y el pronombre (Madrid: Manuales de la Revista de Occidente, 1951), p. 174.

[4]Iannucci, pp. 30-39.

[5]Domnita Sirbu-Dumitrescu, "Observaciones acerca del plural de los abstractos negativos en español" (Paper presented at the local chapter of the American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese, California State University, Fullerton, March 23, 1985).

[6]In the case of desgana vs. gana/ganas 'desire' the use of the singular or plural is determined by geographical dialects. The singular gana is always used in the expression dar la gana 'to feel like.'

[7]Notice that mal 'evil' and bien 'good' show different semantic features. Mal has two meanings: 'evil' (abstract noun) and 'illness' (concrete noun) while bien is only an abstract noun, 'supreme goodness.' In their plural forms both are concrete, meaning 'illnesses' and 'riches' respectively.

[8]Another proof of the linguistic tendency to use the negative part of the language more than the positive is the use of negative expressions without a positive counterpart such as the ones in (8), (9) and (10):

a. Correr malos vientos (Things to be unfavorable).
b. *Correr buenos vientos.

a. Todo va de mal en peor (Things are worse and worse).
b. *Todo va de bien en mejor.

a. Con malas artes (With foul means, cheating).
b. *Con buenas artes.

[9]For more details see Marcial Prado, "Teoría de la marcación y el género en español," Hispania 65, 1982 pp. 258-266.

[10]Some textbooks refer to the stylistic and poetic value of such plurals like aguas, nieves, arenas, fríos. There is nothing poetic in VOX dictionary's definition of arroyo 'creek': "parte de la calle por donde corren las aguas." There seems to be a slight change of meaning whenever the plural form is used, and that change may be difficult to explain. Most natives, for example, associate aguas with 'a stream of water'; calores with 'heat waves'; nieves with 'several snowed places'; arenas with 'vast beaches or deserts.'

[11]The use of the singular form la in this type of expression is less frequent than las, as in pasarla bien 'to have a good time.' In Mexico, the use of the enclitic (never proclitic) le is very frequent with verbs and nouns: ándale, órale, híjole, quiúbole, etc.